

THE REHASH PLAGUE

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THE percentage of rehash in recent books on history has assumed annoying proportions, to say the least. I wish I could think of a nicer word than rehash, but "recapitulation of things already in print and easily available" does not cover the matter adequately and is not marked with the stamp of disapproval which this practice deserves.

Most historical works necessarily contain some old material. No one can write a book on the Revolutionary War without mentioning the battle of Lexington or Cornwallis' surrender at Yorktown. The question is whether he should write the book

at all, unless he has a new message of some kind. Or does the mere rewording of standard books earn people the right to call themselves authors?

A man writing a volume on English literature would naturally make Shakespeare the center of a chapter; but he would scarcely reprint whole acts of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, just because he can do so legally. Yet, historical writers repeat each other endlessly and reprint well-known facts that could and should be handled by reference notes. One should think, for example, that the legendary love of young Lincoln and Ann Rutledge is now known to every American past high school age; but it is served up again and again in one form or another with a pride and relish that should be reserved for new discoveries. One book on Lincoln, published a short time ago, actually contained some chapters lifted *in toto* (although with credit where due) from a book already on the market.

The rehash nuisance is fed by what is euphoni-ously described as the current historical trend. In plain English it might be called the desire to cash in on a demand created by another recent success-

ful publication. The question of ethics apparently does not enter into the situation. We have become pretty tolerant in that respect, too much perhaps, and not only in historical literature. When one radio station resuscitates an old song or opera, you may expect other stations to jump on the same tunes without delay, for fear of missing the procession. I suppose they, too, are following the current trend.

Repetition of known history is under no legal restraint. Historical events are not protected by copyright; only historical books are, and these can be plundered by a simple expedient. Serious historians publish their source material, some of which they may have unearthed at great expenditure of time and money. Anyone may consult or merely re-quote these newly-disclosed sources and thereby practically re-write the pioneer's book without fear of legal consequences.

The difference between plagiarizing and rehashing appears to me only one of degree. A plagiarist steals the mental property of one individual; a rehasher repeats in slightly changed form information gathered by one or several authors. But while

plagiarism is looked upon as a contemptible literary crime, and is rare, rehashing is condoned by many publishers and critics and is gaining ground.

An historical book may be a most desirable addition to the existing literature even without containing much that is original, provided the author approaches his subject from a new angle, or else is compiling, criticising or sifting scattered information. Sandburg's "War Years" is an outstanding example; a very recent book of this type is Stanley F. Horn's "The Army of Tennessee." In these instances careful analysis of existing evidence and beauty of presentation more than make up for the comparative paucity of new matter.

I offer no suggestions for the correction of the rehash plague. The freedom of the press must be preserved at all hazards, no matter how it is abused. Any remedy must come through aroused public opinion. When exasperated readers will be driven to ascertain how much mere repetition a book contains before they buy it, the end of this evil will be in sight.

